

DRAMA AS OFFERING: THE  
*PRINCELY PLEASURES AT KENELWORTH*

**B**EHIND the mature Elizabethan drama, there were many forms of masking, disguisement and display as well as the academic forms of the moral and the interlude. The actors were not members of a closed trade or mystery, performing before a passive set of spectators. Playing was continuous with the life of the time, one branch of a tree. Sports and pastimes on the one hand, oratory and exhortation on the other nourished the offerings of players, common or learned. The better sort of spectators might have taken part in a masque, the humbler would have appeared in a Plough Monday disguising, a May Lord or Lady's train, a Christmas shew of St. George and the Dragon. Schoolboys were open rivals of the common players; Inns of Court and prentices alike had their plays.

Revels and triumphs were a collective way of celebrating and paying tribute to a Lord. The ancient Roman triumph was carefully studied; the distinction between a triumph and an ovation, for example, was fully appreciated. Triumphant entries of a monarch to his coronation or on progress followed a pattern derived from such studies; the triumphal arch, with its great central gate, its musicians in the upper gallery, and thronged windows on either side, has a striking resemblance to the form of the public stage as it eventually evolved.

Summer progresses and Christmas revels divided Elizabeth's year. Her country welcomes developed into a special kind of shew, designed to glorify both the Queen and the City or Great House which received her. It was not merely an Offering of Homage but a celebration; the humble descendant of such grand occasions today is the Village Fête,

with which every village entertains itself at some point in a damp English summer. Very often the Elizabethan speaker was dashed with a shower of rain, while the Queen obligingly stayed her horse under a tree to hear him out.

The seventies was the period in which the Welcomes developed; during the decade of the Armada there were fewer but they were renewed again early in the nineties. They immediately preceded the great flowering of lyric in the eighties; for which they supplied one great theme—that of the Queen herself in her many aspects; Zabeta, Diana, Cynthia, Pandora.

The legend of the Queen, built up throughout her reign, and used by her with instinctive skill, presented her first as the Deborah of the Reformation; this was the work of the religious polemical writers of the sixties; then as the chaste and cruel beauty; as the goddess who scattered blessings, wealth and happiness; as the preserver of peace; as the “dearest dread”; as the heavenly virgin exempt from the touch of time. Her own conception of her role was that she was married to England and the nursing mother of her people; she spoke of her coronation ring as her wedding ring; on both sides the relationship was shot through with passion and artifice.

The poets were given a Laura, if not a Beatrice (as Gascoigne recognised in a sonnet prefixed to an Offering). Constantly in processions and welcomes the Queen was confronted by a figure representing herself. This happened even in her coronation procession. The image of the Queen supplied the simple with something on which to focus their loyalty; and since even the most complex are not without their own level of imaginative needs, this figure of the Maiden Queen came slowly to crystallise lyric poetry.

The power of Elizabeth's legend lay in the fact that it was not a static but a dynamic affair. She was mistress of the unexpected and of the art of procrastination, of the informal as well as the regal and imperial approach to her people. She would give, and sometimes from simple people permit, astonishing familiarities. Unlike the stories of the heathen gods, hers was unfolding from day to day. Her motto was *Semper Eadem*, but mutability of mood became one of her chief means of government. A dynamic relation is the basis of drama. The first lively comedy of the English stage, that of John Lyly, is to some extent based on the courtship of the Queen. *Endimion* and *Sapho and Phao* shadow her exciting and uncertain relations with her court, relations at once formal and mutable, or as Spenser was to shew them, a perpetual Quest.

The *Princely Pleasures at Kenelworth*, as they were said to be the most costly, are the most famous of Elizabeth's country welcomes. She visited the Earl of Leicester from 9 to 28 July 1575; two accounts survive, one by George Gascoigne, who devised some of the outdoor shews, and who gives due prominence to his own productions, even when they went unperformed; the other describing chiefly the decorations and the country sports in the conventional form of a Familiar Letter, usually called Laneham's Letter.

The *Princely Pleasures* give the first texts of a court shew to survive; they were the product of many talents, but quite a number of the items were cut out, for the Earl laid on his devices as lavishly as everything else on this sumptuous occasion. He spent like a prince and was said to have disbursed £1,000 a day; but he was rewarded in kind; reputedly he gained two hundred thousand crowns in grants from the Queen.

The approach to the castle, a bridge over a dry moat, was decorated with gifts from seven gods—Sylvanus, Pomona, Ceres, Bacchus, Neptune, Mars, Apollo; they included baskets of live fowl, bowls of fish, trophies of arms; and all, with the Lord himself, were offered to Elizabeth in a Latin verse written over the gateway with her name in gold; as she arrived at eight o'clock at night, it was also recited to her by a poet, pointing to each of the gifts in turn. Elizabeth had been already saluted a bowshot from the castle by a Sybil who appeared from an arbour, and by a comic Porter, dressed like Hercules, a part composed and played by the Esquire Bedell of the University of Oxford. Gigantic trumpeters eight feet high marched to and fro upon the battlements; concealed within were real trumpeters who sounded a fanfare of welcome. These Arthurian giants were reinforced by the Lady of the Lake, who made offer of her domain to the Queen. A characteristic retort mingling the gracious and the regal came from Gloriana: "We thought this Lake had been ours and do you now say it is yours? Well, we will common more with you hereafter!"

Mulcaster and Paten wrote the Latin verses; Edward Ferrars, who had been Edward VI's Lord of Misrule quarter of a century before, wrote the speech of the Lady of the Lake and doubtless designed the gigantic trumpeters, for they resemble his instructions for an earlier mask. Finally a tremendous peal of ordnance greeted the royal entry, which might have been heard twenty miles away.

Although after seventeen years Leicester could hardly have aimed at doing more than continue his courtship, he was still the Queen's favourite, the most powerful of her subjects. Lesser men had their hopes, and for George Gascoigne, a gentleman who had rioted away his patrimony and was in

great need of royal favour, it was an opportunity to catch the Queenly eye, which he exploited to the full. Drama as Offering is designed to enlarge and glorify the present moment by magnificent comparisons: but it is essential to such offering as distinct from drama proper, that the shew shall dissolve into compliment, and that the true personalities both of actors and chief spectator shall be revealed.

The Queen hunted all Monday; at nine o'clock as she returned by torchlight she was met by a savage man—Gascoigne, who spoke a speech of his own penning in which he wondered at the transformation of the scene, and learnt in a song with Echo of the Queen's visit. This enabled all the previous welcomes to be run over and explained again with some compliments to the dazzling beauty which suddenly confronted the Savage Man, and some hints of the play which he was hoping to present to her a little later. Unfortunately, as Laneham in his letter with joyful malice describes, in breaking his club by way of homage, Gascoigne hurled the top from him with such force that it almost struck the royal horse's head; the beast took fright and reared but the Queen kept her seat. "No hurt, no hurt" quoth her highness, which words "we were all glad to hear and took them to be the best part of the play." She also remarked, whether in excuse of him or in annoyance, that "the actor was blind."

Far from being daunted, Gascoigne seized on this remark and inserted an interlude into his own play of *Zabeta*, in which the Son of the Savage Man appeared to tell the Queen that his father had indeed been stricken blind by sight of the royal beauty and the power of her words. But in spite of the actors being ready in their garments for three days, "lack of opportunity and seasonable weather" prevented the performance of the play.

Gascoigne's chance came at the Queen's departure when he was asked to compose a farewell. As she was out hunting he appeared as Sylvanus, God of the Woods, a slightly more civilized character, recalling once more the gifts offered at her coming, describing the dismay of all the gods at her departure, and making her offer of many more gifts if she would but remain. Fearing he would be out of breath the Queen stayed her horse, but Sylvanus assured her he could run for twenty miles if it would not offend her; and so, trotting persistently by the royal stirrup, declaimed a long tale of the cruelties of a certain nymph Zabeta, who had by a fatal metamorphosis turned all her lovers into trees. One of these, Deep Desire, spoke from the depths of a holly bush for the Knight of the Castle, Leicester himself, singing a lament which the gods had taught him. Sylvanus wound up the shew; but he was thriftily to re-use some of the ingredients a few months later at the house of Sir Henry Lee. A kind of serial story evolved, in which the Queen beheld her subjects cast in various rôles to suit the various occasions; she herself remained always the cruel beauty, but as the skilful love poet turned the praise of his lady into a plea for her mercy, so the poet turned praise of the Queen into a modest form of self advertisement. Dexterity, boldness and the power to improvise were essential to the game.

The cancelled play may have been held up by more than simply the weather; for if Leicester had scanned it, he might have thought it went beyond the bounds of prudence. In it, Diana searching for her nymph Zabeta, was enlightened by Mercury, who descended to explain that Juno had given Zabeta rule, but could not persuade her to matrimony. He presented the goddess to the Queen; more compliments fol-

lowed. Juno's messenger Iris concludes the play by expressing a hope which was a little too pointed for diplomacy, and was perhaps more likely to be cherished by Leicester's followers than by the Earl himself:

I am but messenger,  
But sure she bad me say  
That where you now in princely port  
Have passed a pleasant day  
A world of wealth at will  
You henceforth shall enjoy  
In wedded state, and therewithal  
Hold up from great annoy  
The staff of your estate.  
O Queen, O worthy Queen,  
Yet never wight felt wedded bliss  
But such as wedded been.

Such observations, even from the Queen of Heaven, might have strained the royal temper. Ten years before, in 1565, a play had been given before Elizabeth at court in which the rival claims of matrimony and chastity were debated by Juno and Diana; when it was over, Elizabeth turned to the Spanish Ambassador and said "This is all against me."

Gascoigne's was not the only shew to be cut; there was to have been a night skirmish involving the rescue of the Lady of the Lake from her captor, Breuz sans Pitié, never to be accomplished but in the presence of a better maid than herself. The Lady came instead to tell of her captivity and how she was freed by Elizabeth; Triton and Arion heralded her; and here, though Gascoigne gives the speeches, and Laneham was ravished by the music, a later account declares that Goldingham, who played Arion, was hoarse and therefore tearing off his headpiece when he found himself unable to sing, he declared himself to be no Arion but honest Harry Goldingham: "which pleased the Queen better than if it had

gone through the right way";\* for clowning was always an alternative to compliment, and drama could as easily be dissolved in jest as in compliment.

Bearbaiting, tumbling by a marvellous Italian, fireworks filled up the days. Other sports and pastimes went on inside the Castle. On Sunday, July 17, Laneham says, "after supper was there a play presented of very good theme, but so set forth by the actors' well handling, that pleasure and mirth made it seem very short, though it lasted two good hours and more."

This is the only hint given of the presence at the Castle of the Earl of Leicester's Men, the most distinguished troop of players in the country. Gascoigne was not interested in common players, and perhaps he had no access to the performances given indoors. The play, and the "ridiculous device" of the minstrel of Islington, were I believe the work of professionals; and the writer of the Letter, in my view, had the very best reasons for knowing all about them. But that is another story.

Laneham, in contrast to his reticence about common players, gives a very full description of the country sports provided in Elizabeth's honour by the townsfolk of Coventry. These include the "merry marriage," a burlesque shew with hideous bride, clownish groom, and tilting at the Quintain by riders, some of whom lacked boots while some lacked stirrups and who were fairly obviously mounted pick-a-back on one another's shoulders—a form of rural sport which is depicted in the margin of the Luttrell Psalter and which lasted till the time of James I. Laneham's description of the clownish groom follows a stock pattern, and was repeated almost

\* Harl. MS. 6395, f. 221 (a commonplace book of Simon L'Estrange of Hunstanton).



exactly by Robert Greene in his *Farewell to Folly* sixteen years later. Laneham depicts

The bridegroom foremost, in his father's tawny worsted jacket (for his friends were feign that he should be a bridegroom before the Queen) a fair straw hat with a capital crown steeple-wise on his head; a pair of harvest gloves on his hands, as a sign of good husbandry; a pen and inkhorn at his back, for he would be known to be bookish, lame of a leg that was broken in his youth at football; well beloved yet of his mother that lent him a new muffler for a napkin, that was tied to his girdle for losing;

and Greene,

A wealthy farmer's son, who handsomely decked up in his holiday hose was going very mannerly to be foreman in a morris dance, and as near as I can guess thus was he apparelled: he was a tall slender youth, clean made with an indifferent face, having on his head a straw hat steeple wise, bound about with a band of blue buckram, he had on his father's best tawny worsted jacket; for that this day's exploit stood upon his credit, he was in a pair of hose of red kersey, close trussed with a point afore, his mother had lent him a new muffler for a napkin and that was tied to his girdle for losing, he had a pair of harvest gloves on his hands as shewing good husbandry, and a pen and ink at his back; for the young man was a little bookish. . . .

The burlesque shew is mocked in very much the terms in which the courtiers mocked the ridiculous device of the Minstrel of Islington, or in which the lords of Athens mocked Pyramus and Thisbe; the Coventry men however also presented another device, their ancient "storial shew," a fight between the English and the Danes. This was led by the redoubtable Captain Cox, a mason by trade, master of the town musters, also Aleconner for the town. He remained so famous that his memory was revived by Ben Jonson in a masque given at Kenilworth as late as 1626. The Welcome was truly representative of all levels of society.

The storial shew, preceded by a drill display, was also given on Sunday 17 July; as the Queen was drawn away by dancing in the great chamber, they were granted the unusual privilege of replaying it two days later, and were rewarded with two fat buck, and five marks in money. At a time when the well rehearsed plays of the gentlemen were being thrust aside "for lack of opportunity and seasonable weather," this must have given the simple revellers fresh courage in their struggle with the local divines, who had succeeded in banning the shew. in spite of protests that it was founded on story and contained no Popery.

For the past fifteen years the Mayor and Corporation of London had been waging an even fiercer war upon professional players, but had recently suffered a notable defeat at the hands of Leicester's Men. Sympathy with the local efforts at supporting pastime together with amusement at the simplicity of their performance would be natural in a player, and I believe, for reasons which I hope to explain elsewhere, that Laneham's Letter was not as it purports to be, the epistle of a tradesman turned court officer, but that it was written by John Laneham, one of the leading members of Leicester's Men, and that its use of popular sports and pastimes as well as singing and display reflects the sympathies of this early and famous company of players. Thus all three groups whose love of the art of acting contributed to the Elizabethan theatre as it was to evolve in the next decade were present: the gentle and the simple players, and unobtrusively, the Common Players who were within a year of this to make the great venture of building a public Theatre in London.

The secrets of the professional players have been well kept; it was not the players but the gentlemen who "told all." Gascoigne observes:

And now ye have as much as I could recover hitherto of the devices executed there; the country shew excepted and the merry marriage: the which were so plain as needeth no further explication.

while his printer proudly offers "the very true and perfect copies" in place of "a report thereof lately printed by the name of *The Pastime of the Progress*: which indeed doth nothing touch the particularity of any commendable action."

This, unless it is an alternative title for Laneham's Letter, has been lost.

The revels were not ended when Elizabeth departed from Kenilworth. At the end of August she arrived at the house of Leicester's follower Sir Henry Lee, whose love for ceremony had constituted him the Queen's Champion. She was greeted once more by a Sybil and then by a combat between two knights, one of whom, Loricus, was Lee himself. The combat was stayed by the arrival of Hemetes the Hermit—who was blind; but who recovered his sight miraculously in the presence of Elizabeth. Here is Gascoigne, it would appear, thriftily developing his original plan. Hemetes tells a lengthy romantic tale about the two knights and a damsel who accompanied one of them. To follow up a spirited action by a long tale might seem a curious anticlimax; Hemetes however is acting as Truchman or Presenter to the shew, and the author of the Familiar Letter in which it is detailed observes:

In which tale, if you mark the words, with this present world, or were acquainted with the state of the devices, you should find no less hidden than uttered, and no less uttered than should deserve a double reading over, even of those (with whom I find you a companion) that have disposed their hours to the study of great matters.

The story pleased so much that the characters were revived in a little play. Meanwhile Hemetes leads the Queen

to a bower hung with allegorical devices relating to lords of the court too deep and subtle for common understanding. Here he leaves her; and here she is visited by the Fairy Queen, wearing the personal livery of Elizabeth—black and white—who makes a presentation of a rainbow-coloured gown. She is led to the house through a grove where a song comes from one imprisoned in an oak. This time it was Edward Dyer, Leicester's Secretary, one of the many who were especially seeking Elizabeth's favour at this time.

Such artless repetition might have strained even a royal tact; but the little play of Contareus and Caudina, which developed from the hermit's romance, has a novel and very successful theme. Two lovers who have faced great dangers for love, when they are at last united, agree to part for their country's good, since she, alas, is of royal blood and he, alas, is but a knight. The debate which begins with all the arguments in favour of true love and ends with prolonged laments, is obviously no direct reflexion of a royal romance, but equally obviously touches on tender possibilities. The Fairy Queen, arbitress and *dea ex machina*, is Elizabeth's official deputy in the play. The Queen meanwhile was presented with an "obscure device," which for the better concealing of its meaning, was penned in Italian.

When the art of courtship had so spread its ingenuities, the debate between love and reason, love of desire and love of kind could not have appeared pedantic. A heroic mood is sustained in verse, which though it lacks the dimension of full drama, yet reaches a transparent simplicity.

You must regard the commonweal's good plight  
And seek the whole, not only one, to save. . . .

If you do well, I cannot do amiss,  
Though losing you, I lose my only bliss. . . .

Good hap light on the land where I was born,  
Though I do live in wretched state forlorn

cried the self-banished lover. The lady remains constant through division.

And absent if your love continue still,  
My gain is great that still this ground have laid,  
That honest love might think it no disgrace,  
Though they that love do hap to sunder place

In firm conviction he takes his final farewell.

Yet this I am assured her princely heart,  
Where she hath loved, will never quite forget.  
I know in her I shall have still a part,  
In honest sort I know she loves me yet.

The play was observed to move great passion in the Queen and her ladies; they called for a copy in order to study and repeat it. The Queen's lovers could not of course venture to depict her royal self as other than the divine arbitress, the Fairy Queen.

Immortal states, as you know mine to be,  
From passions blind affects are quite and free.

Yet the pathos of the lover who forbears even to see his divinity "for country's good" would certainly shadow what must be the impossible desires of every man beholding the matchless beauty of two-and-forty summers.

The delight in beauty which could devise these welcomes sprang from something better than calculation. That unity which a strong monarchy gave to society was felt imaginatively as well as rationally. In these country Progresses, Elizabeth appeared as a sort of pastoral goddess, perpetual Lady of the May; and soon the mysterious unity of the monarch and countryside was built into pastoral lyric, in the great flowering which began with the April Eclogue of the *Shepherd's Calendar*:

## The Rice Institute Pamphlet

See where she sits upon the grassy green  
(O seemly sight!)  
Yclad in scarlet like a maiden queen,  
And ermines white:  
Upon her head a crimson coronet,  
With damask roses and daffadillies set:  
Bay leaves between  
And primrose green  
Embellish the sweet violet.

Such poetry had behind it a decade of pastime. The several accounts of the *Princely Pleasures* and their sequel must, if they encountered them, have given pain to the godly. To question the Queen's right to magnificent offerings would be disloyal; yet how could a painful preacher thunder against sinful sports and pastimes while the Deborah of the Reformation was setting such a bad example? And when the offering was directed, not towards a royal mistress but towards the common people, the image reflected was to be that of a whole nation; between the celebration of London and England's greatness, between *The Pleasant and Stateley Morall of the Three Lords and Three Ladies of London* and the *Famous Histories* of English kings, a national drama was born. For these much greater Offerings, the personal offerings to Elizabeth prepared the way.

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